

Fixing Dysfunctional Culture

With Patsy Feeman, Leb Tannenbaum and Patrick Lyons
Episode 15

As a leader, talk is cheap. Action is what counts and practice makes a difference. Below are practical steps to improve performance.

- **Creating a compelling vision takes hard work, time, focus and listening.** Carmen Bianco and Loriann Hoffman told us in Episode 11 that it took them 10 months of hard work to create a new and compelling Vision to change the culture at New York City Transit. This work involved engaging all the right people in the organization, working together to determine their purpose, meeting frequently to create the Vision, and then communicating and cascading the Vision down through the entire organization so every employee understood where the business was going and how their work fit into that. If you try to rush this process, you risk creating the wrong Vision or one that isn't compelling enough to make anyone care. Slow and steady wins this race.
 - **Don't take your Vision for granted.** Creating your Vision isn't a check-box exercise where you can set it and forget it. Even in a normal times, it's important to regularly revisit your Vision to keep it relevant and top of mind. In uncertain times such as these, it's more important than ever. Don't let your Vision become stale or irrelevant by forgetting to review it often and refresh it as needed.
 - **Ask yourself as the leader: Am I inspired, and do I inspire others?** We often think we're doing a great job hiding frustration or lack of energy from others, but the people who follow you see through the façade more often than not. What would it take for you to be inspired again? Energy is contagious, so when you lead from a place of internal inspiration, others will gravitate to your leadership and be inspired themselves.
 - **Is the organization clear on our direction, aligned in the allocation of resources, focused on what's most important, and accountable for our actions?** There's not much more to say on this one, so we'll leave it right there.
 - **Create a strategy that, when properly executed, gets you closer to the Vision.** Too often, leaders think strategy is just taking last year's plan and increasing everything by 8 to 10 percent. That's not strategy, nor will it get your organization to think differently about anything. Learn the difference between strategy and operations, then create a strategic direction for the business that your people can understand and align around.
 - **Your people bring your culture to life, so make it your goal to bring them to life.** Good luck executing without your people, and good luck engaging them in a low-performing
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culture. If you want to execute your strategy, you'll need to engage and genuinely care for your people so they'll want to help you deliver your Vision. The best way to achieve your own goals is to help others achieve theirs.

- **Make empathy an important core competency in your organization.** Merriam-Webster defines empathy as *the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner*. In other words, meet people where they are without judgment, convey that you hear them, and figure out what you can do to help them. When you model this and others follow your lead, you will be an employer of choice.
- **The best cultures allow employees to have input into their goals and objectives.** Engage them in the Vision, get them excited about it, and allow them input into how they believe you can get there. It's more important to have employees buy-in to their goals than it is for the goals to be perfect.
- **Understand that 'accountability issues' are often symptomatic of a greater lack of commitment to Core Values.** When everyone in the organization is actively living and leading your Core Values, accountability should be high across the board. Finger-pointing and blaming wanes when employees believe in and exhibit the company's most important behaviors. When you see chronic lack of accountability in the business, try reinforcing the Core Values and see what happens.
- **Go Direct. Be Direct. Redirect.** Gossip and venting are culture killers, and this is an incredibly simple yet powerful concept to eliminate both in your organization. Make a commitment to 'Go Direct' whenever you have an issue with someone, then 'Be Direct' with them about the issue while still maintaining respect and exhibiting Core Values. And if anyone in your organization comes to you to gossip, complain or vent about someone else, 'Redirect' that person to 'Go Direct' and 'Be Direct' themselves. You shouldn't have to redirect people very long before they figure out their gossip is no longer acceptable.
- **Decision-making is an important input into your culture, so be intentional about how you want decisions made.** Should they be top-down, bottom-up, a dictatorship, majority-rules, consensus or something else entirely? Each of these impacts how people feel about working for you, affects their feelings of empowerment, and either facilitates or inhibits how work is done. Bring your leadership team together specifically to discuss how decisions are made in the organization, what impact that has on your people, and what adjustments need to be made.

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- **Silos are indicative of a fractured culture.** They often form because of breakdowns in communication, competing priorities, insufficient resources and an unclear overarching Vision. They can only be broken down through an intentional focus by you, the CEO or senior leader, communicating clear expectations of collaboration and mutual respect. Make no mistake, silos create battle lines to be drawn in the organization, forcing employees to choose sides whether you like it or not. They also kill your culture.
- **A great culture requires leveraging the 'knuckle' in your organization: next-level leaders, managers and frontline supervisors.** No matter how compelling your Vision, how clear your strategy, or how strong your Core Values, a high-performance culture requires the alignment of leaders at every level of the business to lead your people and carry forth your message. Choose them wisely, train them, mentor them, support them and equip them to be successful. Otherwise, your Vision will become watered-down as it passes through them from your office to the last employee on the org chart, making your job as CEO that much harder than it already is. Get this right and your culture thrives. Get it wrong and your culture suffers.

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